DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 510 CS 214 677

AUTHOR Stay, Byron L.
TITLE Designing the Undergraduate Rhetoric and Writing Major.
PUB DATE Jan 95
NOTE 5p.
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT Composition Chronicle; v7 n9 p5-7 Jan 1995

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Departments; Educational Change; Higher Education; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *Rhetoric; Undergraduate Study; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse Communities; *Mount Saint Marys College MD

ABSTRACT

The new Rhetoric and Writing major at Mount St. Mary's College (an independent Catholic, liberal arts institution in northern Maryland) developed in response to local conditions and local problems. In 1988, owing to a mutual recognition of the different missions of the writing and literature programs, the writing faculty were officially separated from the English department to staff and teach in the newly created Writing and Communications Program. Because of an influx of students, by the spring of 1991, faculty members of the program began discussing the possibility of proposing a major in writing. In February 1992, the administration created the Department of Rhetoric and Writing to house the new major that sought to link journalism and creative, professional, and academic writing to rhetorical and communication theory. The major consists of 34 semester hours combining courses in the practice of writing, with courses in journalism, speech, and rhetorical theory and history. Students may take a range of electives which suit their interests. Rhetoric majors raise a number of institutional and disciplinary issues, including finding a focus, finding a name, working with an English department, working with other departments in the academy, and working with the administration. If they do nothing else, independent rhetoric departments represent graphically what composition looks like without literary studies. Undergraduate rhetoric majors may not be possible at every institution, but the questions raised help shed light on the disciplinary community. (RS)

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Byron L. Stay
Mount St. Mary's College
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

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Byron L. Stay
Mount St. Mary's College
Emmitsburg, MD 21727

Where does a student who loves writing find a major? It has long been assumed that English departments and literature programs have cornered the market. Increasingly, however, these students find a home in writing departments. This is not an entirely new phenomenon. St. Edwards University (Austin, Texas), Oakland University (Pontiac, Michigan), and Loyola College (Baltimore, Maryland) all have long-established independent writing departments and writing majors. More recently, Mount St. Mary's College (Emmitsburg, Maryland) and the University of Arkansas-Little Rock have added their names to the list. Other new programs, including those at San Diego State and Colgate, while not having majors, do have independent departments and offer a number of electives in writing. The interest in independent writing programs is further evidenced by the increasing number of sessions, workshops, and think tanks devoted to them at NCTE and CCCC.

As a rule, independent writing programs do not materialize as the result of long-range curricular planning. Most developed in response to local conditions and local problems. The new Rhetoric and Writing major at Mount St. Mary's College is no exception. When we had an opportunity to develop an undergraduate major four years ago, we learned what we could from other programs, then set out to create a major within the context of our institution. Before I explain the mechanics of the major, it might be helpful to consider some of the local history at Mount St. Mary's that made the program possible.

History of the Mount St. Mary's Rhetoric and Writing major

Mount St. Mary's College, located in the mountains of northern Maryland, is an independent Catholic, liberal arts institution with approximately 1400 undergraduate FTEs as well as masters programs in business, theology, and education. The origins of the current writing program can be traced to the opening of the Writing Center in 1980. The Writing Center was initially staffed by two tenure-track faculty members: Carmen Schmersahl and myself. At first, the Writing Center faculty reported directly to an associate dean. Later, we came to report to the chair of the English Department as classroom teachers and to the dean as writing center teachers. Until the creation of the Rhetoric and Writing Department, the Writing Center was always under the auspices of an associate dean.

In 1988, owing largely to a mutual recognition of the different missions of the writing and literature programs, the writing faculty were officially separated from the English department to staff and teach in the newly created Writing and Communications Program. This Program essentially functioned as a department (with a program "director" rather than a chair) except that it had a minor but no major.

About the same time, the undergraduate faculty began revising the College's core curriculum to offer a more integrated series of courses throughout the four years. This core revision had a direct effect on the character of the new writing program. A year-long Freshman Seminar, taught by faculty from all disciplines, replaced freshman composition. This meant that neither the writing center nor the writing program was directly responsible for staffing and teaching freshman composition. That allowed the writing faculty to turn its sights toward students taking upper-level electives. In hindsight, this turn of events was good both for the institution and the writing program.

The Writing and Communications Program. When we separated from the English department, the Writing and Communications Program consisted of four tenured or tenure-track faculty members. We added a fifth tenure-track colleague in 1991. In addition to Carmen and myself, the Program now included a journalist and specialists in classical and contemporary rhetoric. The Program offered a communications minor (with journalism and professional writing tracks) and oversaw the writing center. Over the next few years, increasing numbers of students began creating their own independently designed majors in writing. Because of this influx of students, by the spring of 1991 we began discussing the possibility of proposing our own major in writing.

Aside from the programs at St. Edwards, Oakland, and Loyola, we had no real models for a writing major. We had to ask ourselves, "What does a major in writing look like?" We wanted more than merely a "writing" major. We wanted to link rhetorical history and theory with the practice of writing for two reasons: First, it reflected our own interests in the discipline of rhetoric and composition. Second, we knew that defining ourselves as a liberal arts major was necessary for credibility at our institution, especially in light of the new core curriculum. As a result, we sought to link the practice of writing, in journalism, creative, professional, and academic writing, to rhetorical and communication theory.

Our proposal for a major in "rhetoric and writing" was sent to academic council in the fall of 1991 and was passed unanimously by the faculty later that year. In February 1992 the administration created the Department of Rhetoric and Writing to house the new major. Five majors graduated in 1992 (all independently designed), 4 in 1993, and 14 in 1994. In 1995, 24 are set to graduate.

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Structure of the major

The major consists of 34 semester hours combining courses in the practice of writing, with courses in journalism, speech, and rhetorical theory and history:

Required Courses

RW 204. Composition Theory and Practice
An introductory course designed to give students a broad overview of writing theory, history, methodology, and contemporary issues. Provides students with opportunities to apply theoretical concepts to their own practice of writing.

RW 210. Introduction to Mass Media
A foundation survey in the analysis of major mass media, print, and broadcast journalism, with emphasis on journalism history, law and ethics.

RW 230. Public Speaking
A course in the practical aspects of effective public speaking with special attention to methods of delivery.

RW 325. Art of Persuasion
An examination of persuasive discourse from the 5th Century B.C. to the 19th Century. Students apply historical theories of persuasion to modern practice.

RW 330. Contemporary Rhetorical and Communications Theory
An in-depth reading course covering the major figures, movements, and ideas in modern rhetorical and communication theory. Special emphasis paid to practical applications of theory.

RW 405. Senior Seminar (1 credit)
A course for seniors to assemble a portfolio of their best writing for public exhibition.

The first three of these are intended as entry-level courses. The last three are normally taken during the students' junior or senior years. The senior seminar is offered each fall. In the spring, seniors defend their portfolios orally, explaining their choice of pieces and reading selections from them. Not all writing needs to come from rhetoric and writing classes. Students may include work written for other classes, for student media, or outside of class.

Individualized learning. Because we value independently designed writing tasks and the development of skills that will help students find jobs, we ask that between three and six hours of the major be devoted to "individualized learning." Students may fulfill this requirement by enrolling in internships, taking independent study, or writing for the student media for credit. Students may intern in a wide range of jobs from on-campus offices like communications, sports information, and the career center, to off-campus public relations firms, publishing houses, newspapers, and radio and television stations. Students may also write stories for the student newspaper or yearbook under faculty supervision for 1-2 credits per semester. Other students design special independent study courses with faculty from the rhetoric and writing department.

Elective Courses

In addition to required courses, students may take a range of electives which suit their interests. Some of these electives, like argumentative writing (required of students in our pre-law concentration), are taught each semester. A few others are taught in other departments and cross-listed with Rhetoric and Writing. All of the others are taught at least once every two years. Unless otherwise noted, these are all 3-credit courses.

Typography (taught in the Fine Arts Department)
Intermediate College Writing
Journalism Practicum (1-6 credits)
Broadcast Journalism
Research Writing
Argumentative Writing
Business Communications
Descriptive and Narrative Writing
Professional and Technical Writing
Public Relations
Informal Essay
Graphic Design (taught in the Fine Arts Department)
Editing and Production
News Reporting
Feature and Magazine Writing
Creative Writing (taught in the English Department)
Internships
Independent Study

Larger issues raised by the Rhetoric Major

Rhetoric majors raise a number of interesting institutional and disciplinary issues.

Disciplinary issues I: Finding a focus. Rhetoric and Composition is hardly a well-defined academic unit, especially on the undergraduate level, largely because the discipline of rhetoric and composition is not clearly defined. It should not be surprising that determining the focus of such a major raises serious questions about the relationship between the discipline of rhetoric and composition and the academy. First, is rhetoric a liberal arts or a pre-professional major? Clearly, it is both, but because of an institutional and departmental commitment to the liberal arts, we argued to be seen in the context of other liberal arts disciplines.

Second, if rhetoric is seen as a liberal art, what then is its relationship to journalism, communications, and speech communications? Loyola, St. Edwards, University of Arkansas-Little Rock, and Oakland all include coursework in one or more of these areas. However, the fit is not always easy, especially with journalism. The relationship to speech communications is somewhat closer, perhaps because, like rhetoric and composition, speech communications originated in English departments and is grounded in rhetorical theory. These disciplinary concerns are evident in the name we selected.

Disciplinary issues II: Finding a name. Choosing a name was the very first question we addressed; it was also one of the last that we returned to. Naming was important because it would succinctly reveal to everyone—students, faculty, and our institution—who we are and what we do. Although students seemed to prefer the word "communications," we knew that our interest in rhetoric and composition gave our major a very different flavor than that normally associated with communications departments. There would be no courses in studio skills or interpersonal communication. In short, we came to reject the name "communications" because of truth in advertising.

The name "rhetoric" provided a general, over-arching umbrella describing the practice and theory of writing. The department at Oakland University, for instance, is called "Rhetoric, Communication, and Journalism" but goes by the name "Rhetoric." However, the term has pejorative connotations and we weren't convinced that students (and faculty) would know exactly what it means.

The name "writing" seemed more accessible. Loyola's program is called "Writing and Media" and St. Edwards' is called "English Writing." We were concerned, however, that the term "writing" didn't imply the kind of rigorous intellectual inquiry that we wanted as a base of the new major. The name "rhetoric and writing" was a compromise. Later, we learned that University of Arkansas-Little Rock had chosen the same name for its department.

Institutional Issues I: Working with an English Department. Undergraduate rhetoric majors raise a number of questions concerning the relationship between rhetoric and English. English departments have traditionally overseen composition programs, but the relationship between them has been rocky. Christy Friend, in her study of the marginalization of composition in Gerald Graff's *Professing Literature*, argues that literary studies and composition have never had equal standing in English departments. That being the case, I can imagine three scenarios for the future of English and rhetoric: One, the relationship is perpetuated indefinitely with composition being the stepchild of literature. Two, English departments come to define their mission in terms of "language studies," making a genuine attempt to combine literary and rhetorical theory, or at least attempting to treat them equally. Three, English departments separate themselves from the teaching of composition and become departments of "literary studies." In this third scenario both English departments and composition programs change. If English departments, in down-playing the importance of rhetorical theory, come to define themselves as departments of "literary study," as opposed to "language study," then the chasm between English and rhetoric intensifies, and the separation of rhetoric from English becomes a logical consequence.

History indicates that it is very difficult for rhetoric programs to exist within English departments. As the recent experience of those at Tulane, Hobart and William Smith, and University of Texas-Austin has shown, although the rhetoric and English may seem theoretically compatible, making them politically compatible is a completely different matter.

Institutional Issues II: Working with other departments in the academy. Since rhetoric is by nature interdisciplinary, departments of rhetoric have a much easier time establishing meaningful ties with departments outside English. Even if one does not cross-list courses, a functioning **writing center** can be the focus (and locus) of a writing across the curriculum program. We have not lost sight of the fact, for instance, that our roots lie in the writing center and that it continues to be an important part of our instruction. Further, a good writing major and minor provide excellent complements to those students who want to combine the study of writing with work in other disciplines.

Institutional Issues III: Working with the Administration. Rhetoric has tremendous potential on an institutional level to attract students and to give them a solid education linking liberal arts training with practical skills they can put to use immediately. Our proposal was considered during a year of severe budgetary constraints, yet the administration was firmly supportive throughout the process, partially because they knew the major would attract and retain students. Further, the major can be a source of support for student newspapers, yearbooks, literary magazines, and non-fiction magazines.

If they do nothing else, independent rhetoric departments represent graphically what composition looks like without literary studies. And, to my mind, it looks pretty good. Designing this new major forced us to examine closely our teaching, our place in the academy, and our discipline to try to find points at which they intersect. We had to explain to our colleagues why rhetoric is a liberal art, how rhetorical theory and history speak to our institutional mission, and how rhetoric informs the teaching of writing. Undergraduate rhetoric majors may not be possible at every institution, but the questions they force us to address help shed light on who we are as a disciplinary community.

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